

## Fort Niagara – 1759-1815

### Introduction:

Fort Niagara was a French fortification built in 1726-27 to protect the interests of New France in North America, and is situated on a bluff on the east side of the Niagara River at Lake Ontario north of Youngstown, NY. The French had earlier built two less substantial forts at the site: Fort Conti, built by Cavalier de La Salle in 1679 and Fort Denonville, built by Governor Denonville in 1687. Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry designed the impressive stone-constructed "French Castle," which survives today. Fort Niagara was surrendered to the British in July 1759 following a nineteen-day siege and the wilderness battle of La Belle Famille. The three flags flown daily above the parade ground symbolize the nations that have held Fort Niagara. Each competed for the support of a fourth nation: the powerful Iroquois Confederacy.

The history of Fort Niagara spans more than 300 years. During the colonial wars in North America a fort at the mouth of the Niagara River was vital, for it controlled access to the Great Lakes and the westward route to the heartland of the continent. With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, however, the strategic value of Fort Niagara diminished. It nonetheless remained an active military post well into the 20th century.



### The Battle of Fort Niagara, 1759:

The Battle of Fort Niagara was a siege late in the French and Indian War, the North American theatre of the Seven Years' War. The British siege of Fort Niagara in July 1759 was part of a campaign to remove French control of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley regions, making possible a western invasion of the French province of Canada in conjunction with General James Wolfe's invasion to the east.

British General Jeffrey Amherst made plans for the 1759 military campaigns of the French and Indian War that included an expedition to capture Fort Niagara, a major French military and supply point between the French province of Canada and their forts in the Ohio Country. Amherst chose Brigadier General John Prideaux to lead the expedition, which also included Sir William Johnson, the British Indian agent who led the expedition's Iroquois forces.

Fort Niagara had been largely constructed under the direction of Captain Pierre Pouchot of the French Army. In early 1759, General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm and New France's Governor, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, sent him with about 2,500 men to fortify Niagara beyond the 500 men that had wintered there. Pouchot, under orders from Vaudreuil, sent many of those men south to Fort Machault (today at Franklin, Pennsylvania near the confluence of the French Creek and Allegheny River) in mid-June as part of a plan to reinforce the French forts of the Ohio Country and attack the British at Fort Pitt (today at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). The forces left to defend Niagara consisted of about 200 men from the regiments of Royal Roussillon, Languedoc, La Sarre, and Béarn, 20 artillerymen, and about 300 provincial troops and militia.

Prideaux's British Army troops consisted of the 44th and 46th Regiments, and two companies from the 60th, numbering about 2,200 men. He also commanded 2,500 provincial militia from New York and 700 from Rhode Island. Delayed by high water on the Mohawk River and the late arrival of some of the provincial companies, the expedition did not begin leaving Schenectady until mid-May. On 27 June the army arrived at Fort Oswego, where they were joined by Johnson and about 600 Iroquois.

Leaving men behind to garrison Oswego, Prideaux departed on 1 July for Niagara with over 3,500 men. While the French had ships patrolling Lake Ontario for British movements, inattention on the part of one of the crews allowed the British flotilla to avoid discovery. They arrived at Fort Niagara on 6 July, landed near a marsh out of sight of the fort, and immediately began siege operations. One of the main reasons they probably lifted their siege of Fort Niagara, was their Iroquois kinfolks, who were shaming Native Americans. White and Iroquois casualties were 338 killed and almost 400 captured by the enraged Anishinabek, who probably killed them all later on.

The French had about one hundred Iroquois allies at the Fort who deserted when the British arrived. Captain Pouchot directed a vigorous defense.

Prideaux was killed when a shell fragment from one of his own guns hit him, and command of the British forces fell to Sir William Johnson. Johnson was a provincial officer and not in the regular army, and thus there was some question of his right to take command. But Sir William held a royal colonel's commission in his role as commander of the Iroquois auxiliaries, and so he insisted on remaining in command after a lower-ranking regular army officer, Lt. Col. Frederick Haldimand, arrived on the scene.

The French capitulated on 26 July after a French relief force was defeated at the Battle of La Belle-Famille two miles south of the fort. The fort remained in British hands for the next thirty-seven years.

The capitulation of Fort Niagara occurred on the same day that French troops abandoned Fort Carillon to an overwhelming British army under General Amherst. Fort St. Frédéric was also destroyed as French troops abandoned Lake Champlain to protect the Canadian heartland. Most French forces were at Quebec, where Montcalm was leading the defences against Wolfe's siege. Quebec fell in September

1759, and all of New France was surrendered in September 1760. The remaining French forts in the Ohio and Illinois Country were eventually turned over to British forces.

### **Treaty of Fort Niagara, 1764:**

The 1764 **Treaty of Fort Niagara** was signed by Sir William Johnson for The Crown and 24 Nations from the Six Nations, Seneca, Wyandot of Detroit, Menominee, Algonquin, Nipissing, Ojibwa, Mississaugas, and others who were part of the Seven Nations of Canada and the Western Lakes Confederacy. The Treaty was concluded on August 1, 1764. The treaty transferred possession of a narrow four mile strip of land along the Niagara River's western shore. This treaty also detached some of them from Pontiac's Rebellion.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 established the British definition of Indian Country. On these lands The Crown claimed sovereignty but it also decreed that Indian Country were to be considered the possession of the Aboriginal peoples who lived on these lands. Consequently, in order to transfer ownership of the land to The Crown through the surrendering of the land from the indigenous peoples, the British Crown began formalizing the Treaty of Fort Niagara with the First Nations on July 8, 1764, through this Treaty Council. In protest, the Odawa of Detroit, the Wyandot of Sandusky, and the Lenape and Shawnee of the Ohio failed to come to the Treaty Council. This treaty created a new Covenant Chain between Britain and the First Nations of the western Great Lakes. During the War of 1812, Nations involved with this treaty allied themselves with the British, as the Nations believed the treaty bound them to the British cause.

### **Occupation of Fort Niagara:**

Throughout the American Revolutionary War, Fort Niagara was the major British supply depot in New York State for Lt. Col. John Butler and his the Loyalist provincial troops, the Butler's Rangers, and Seneca allies who raided rebel supply lines.

Lt. Col. William Stacy, a high-ranking officer of the Continental Army, was captured at the attack on Cherry Valley, New York by Butler's Rangers. He was held captive at Fort Niagara during the summer of 1779.

Fort Niagara became notorious for drinking, brawling, whoring, and cheating. Crude taverns, stores, and bordellos sprouted on "the Bottom", the riverside flat below the fort. About two thousand aboriginals were also encamped near the Fort, in order to obtain their share of food from the military supplies at the fort.

Although Fort Niagara was ceded to the United States after the Treaty of Paris ended the American War of Independence in 1783, the region remained effectively under British control for thirteen years. Only after signing of the Jay Treaty did American forces occupy the fort in 1796. In the interim, United Empire Loyalists fleeing persecution in the new USA were given land grants, typically 100-200 acres per inhabitant in Upper Canada, and some were sustained in the early years partly by aid from the military stores of the fort.

### **Treaty of Fort Niagara, 1781:**

The 1781 Treaty of Fort Niagara, also known as **Niagara Purchase**, was signed by Colonel Guy Johnson for The Crown and representatives of the Ojibwa and Mississaugas Nations concluded on May 9, 1781. The treaty transferred additional lands surrounding Fort Niagara to The Crown.

The 1781 treaty was signed because of the constraints imposed by the 1764 Treaty of Niagara posed several problems due to influx of loyalists into British territory around Fort Niagara during and after the American Revolution. Due to the increased population, Frederick Haldimand, Governor of Quebec proposed the establishment of agricultural settlements around major military forts, but the first treaty did not accommodate for the land needed to sustain agricultural settlements about Fort Niagara. Consequently, the second treaty was negotiated. In this treaty, among the distributed goods were 12 thousand blankets, 23,500 yards of cloth; 5,000 silver ear bobs; 75 dozen razors and 20 gross of jaw harps. The Mississaugas accepted a payment of "300 suits of clothing as payment for a four-mile strip along the Niagara River from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie."

### **Treaty of Fort Niagara, 1787:**

The 1787 **Treaty of Fort Niagara** was signed in 1787. The treaty area ceded in the second treaty was expanded to include Niagara Township, and portions of Stamford, Willoughby and Bertie Townships.

### **The Military Actions in 1813**

Garrisoned by American troops from 1796, Fort Niagara was an important American staging area near the outlet of the Niagara River into Lake Ontario during the War of 1812. It fought several artillery duels with Fort George across the river and was captured by British and Canadian forces on 19 December 1813. Fort Niagara was an important American post. During the early days of the War of 1812, it was involved in several exchanges of artillery fire against the British at Fort George on the other side of the river.

Fort Niagara began its active involvement in the war on 13 October 1812, when it commenced a bombardment of Fort George across the river in support an American landing force that crossed the Niagara River. The fire was returned and a brisk exchange ensued. During this action, it became obvious that Fort Niagara was at a decisive disadvantage -- exposed as it was on its river side and by the fact that Fort George stood on higher ground. During the exchange the Americans were actually forced to abandon the Fort and huddle outside its landward defenses. To counter this advantage, the Americans removed the roofs from the Castle and the two redoubts and mounted cannon on the upper floors. This proved to be increase the guns' effectiveness, for in the next exchange between the forts (on November 21st), the Americans gave better than they got.

On 27 May 1813, the Americans won the Battle of Fort George. This left Fort George in their hands, and they briefly captured the entire Niagara Peninsula, but they were then driven back to a narrow enclave around Fort George after the Battle of Stoney Creek and the aboriginal victory at the Battle of Beaver Dams. Later during the year, almost all the regular soldiers on the Niagara front were redeployed to Sacket's Harbor to take part in an attack down the Saint Lawrence River against Montreal. This left Brig. Gen. George McClure of the New York militia with only 60 regulars, 40 volunteers from the New York

militia and 100 Canadian Volunteers (renegade traitors fighting for the United States) to hold Fort George.

In late 1813, Maj. Gen. Francis de Rottenburg, the British Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, had been alarmed by defeats in the west (the Battle of Lake Erie and the Battle of the Thames) and American concentrations to the east. On 9 October he ordered the troops on the Niagara peninsula to retreat hastily to Burlington Heights at the western end of Lake Ontario. He intended to abandon even this position and concentrate his forces at Kingston but during the first week in December, de Rottenburg was replaced by the more forceful Lt. Gen. Gordon Drummond. Drummond was aware that the American attack on Montreal had been defeated, leaving the American Army stranded in poorly-supplied winter quarters in Upper New York State. He immediately cancelled de Rottenburg's plans for further retreat, and ordered the units at Burlington Heights to advance instead.



By 10 December, winter had set in and McClure learned of this advance. He had despaired of receiving any reinforcements and decided his position was untenable. He hastily evacuated his troops to Fort Niagara. The artillery could not be withdrawn from Fort George and was thrown into the ditch surrounding the fort.

Earlier in the year, the United States Secretary of War, John Armstrong, had given permission to destroy the nearby village of Newark (today Niagara-on-the-Lake) if it became necessary to prevent British troops finding cover close to Fort George. The inhabitants were to be given several days' notice, and care was to be taken that they were not to be left destitute. As the Americans abandoned Fort George, the order was unaccountably given to burn down the village without warning, leaving the inhabitants without shelter or possessions in the depths of winter. Part of the village of Queenston was also torched. The torching and destruction of these villages was implemented by pro-American Canadian Volunteers under Maj. Joseph Willcocks, who had persuaded McClure to proceed without delay. This action was undoubtedly contrary to the conventions that governed warfare at the time, although several similar acts had already been committed by both sides during the War of 1812. At his subsequent court-martial hearing McClure was disgraced for allowing the Volunteers to proceed indiscriminately. Nevertheless, the burning of Newark was to be the pretext for the British to carry out several outrages later.

On the night of 10 December, the 400 residents of the village were forced from their homes and the buildings were burned. On 12 December, the first British troops arrived and occupied Fort George and tended to the civilians. Lt. Gen. Gordon Drummond, the new commander of Upper Canada, was outraged by the destruction and sent McClure a sharp letter demanding that he identify who had ordered the action. Although the US government disavowed McClure's action, much bitterness remained and Drummond undertook a campaign during the winter of 1813-14, in which the American frontier was laid to waste. This campaign began with the capture of Fort Niagara.

Once the British had recovered Fort George, Fort Niagara was vulnerable to a British attack. Its defenders consisted of Captain Nathaniel Leonard's company of the 1st Regiment of Artillery, a company of the 24th U.S. Infantry, and small detachments (mainly convalescent wounded or sick men) from other regular units. Captain Leonard was in command of the fort. He had been attracting unfavourable reports from his superiors since taking charge of the fort in 1812 and was a notorious drunkard but orders to replace him as commandant had not been carried out. The defences of Fort Niagara had been allowed to deteriorate and damage to the outer defences caused by artillery fire in 1812 and early 1813 had not been repaired, although this was not to be a factor in the fort's capture.

Drummond had ordered boats to be brought forward from Burlington. They proceeded by water to the mouth of the Four Mile Creek, from where Canadian militia carried them overland on sledges to Fort George. Beginning at 10:00pm on the night of 18 December, a force consisting of the 100<sup>th</sup> Foot, the grenadier company of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Scots, the grenadier and light companies of the 41<sup>st</sup> Foot, with some detachments of Lincoln Militia and two guides (James McFarland and Daniel Field), crossed the river 3 miles (4.8 km) above Fort Niagara. The bateaux were piloted by men from the Lincoln militia. The force numbered 562 and was under the command of Colonel John Murray, the commanding officer of the 100th Foot. They were equipped with axes and scaling ladders and under orders to use the bayonet so as not to lose the advantage of surprise.

They captured American pickets posted in the village of Youngstown, the men having been trying to stay warm instead of keeping watch. One of the prisoners was forced to reveal the American challenge and password. The British force then advanced silently towards the fort. An advance party of some artillerymen and the grenadier company of the 100th under a lieutenant and a sergeant approached the gate, where the sergeant affected an accent from the southern American states and confused the guard long enough to gain entry. By the time the defenders became aware of the deception, it was too late to stop the British from rushing in.

### **The Recapture of Fort Niagara, 1813-1815**

The garrison had little time and the north redoubt was taken before the Americans could respond. Resistance came mainly from two buildings, the South Redoubt and the Red Barracks, which was being used as a hospital. Some of the defenders barricaded themselves and heavy musket fire came from both buildings. A 6-pounder gun was fired at the British from atop the south redoubt. When the defenders refused demands that they surrender, the British commander offered no quarter to the defenders. The barracks were quickly cleared after several attempts to break in. The door was finally battered down by sledges and hammers and when the British stormed in, a fierce struggle ensued. Captain David Davies of the 100<sup>th</sup> Foot, who commanded the British company attacking the redoubt, gave the infamous order that was given to "Bayonet the whole" of the defenders. The threat had the desired effect and 64 Americans surrendered. Shortly thereafter resistance ended and the fort was secured.



Lieutenant General Drummond soon arrived and took possession of the fort. Several Canadian and First Nation prisoners were released.



Private and Officer of the British 100th Regiment

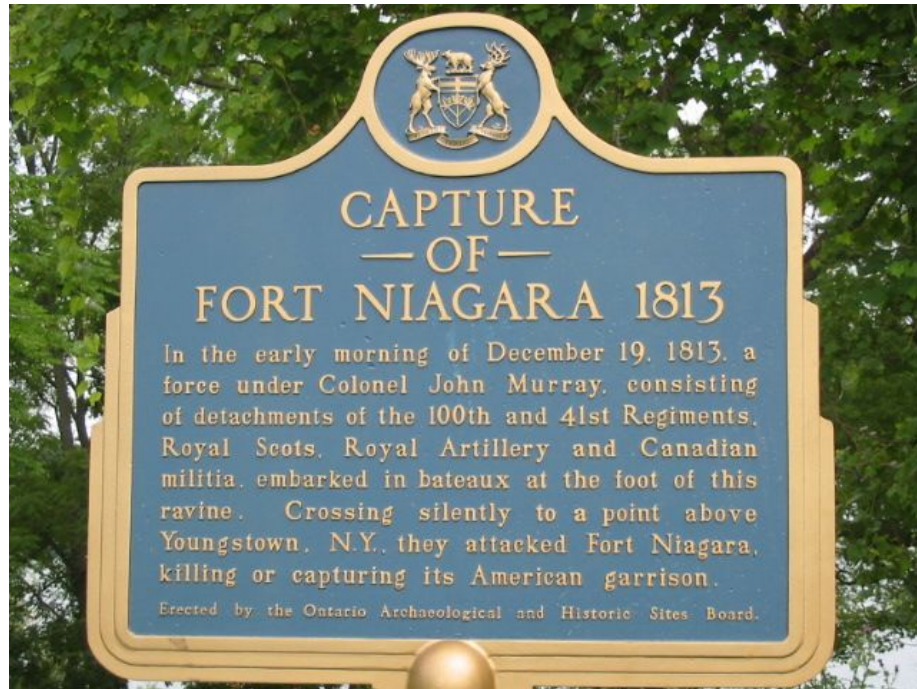


Officer, New York State Militia, 1813 by H.C. McBarron  
(courtesy of Parks Canada)

Only six of the attackers were killed, with five wounded.

The British report on the engagement listed 65 Americans killed, 14 wounded prisoners and 344 other prisoners; and the capture of tons of stores including 27 cannons and over 3000 stands of arms. However, Robert Lee, an American civilian who had been visiting the Fort when it was attacked, gave a sworn deposition on 18 January 1814 that the British report giving 65 Americans killed had been "issued very soon after they took possession of the fort and did not include a number that were afterwards found bayoneted in the cellars of the houses". Lee thought that "at least eighty" Americans had in fact been killed. Captain Leonard was captured at his home two miles away, allegedly drunk.

A force consisting of the centre companies of the Royal Scots and the 41st under Maj. Gen. Phineas Riall followed Murray's troops across the river. They captured several outposts and batteries, and proceeded to burn almost every village on the American side of the river, including Lewiston and a nearby settlement of Tuscarora aboriginals, in reprisal for the burning of Newark. Some aboriginals accompanied Riall; one source stated that up to 500 "Western Indians", who had remained with the British after the Battle of the Thames the previous autumn, took part. Many of the aboriginals (and some British soldiers) became drunk on looted liquor and several American settlers were scalped. Riall was eventually prevented from advancing further south by some militia and Canadian Volunteers who destroyed the bridge over the Tonawanda Creek.



Having returned to the Canadian side of the Niagara, Riall marched upstream past Niagara Falls, carrying the boats. On 30 December 1813, Riall crossed the Niagara again, 2 miles (3.2 km) downstream of Black Rock and defeated American forces at the Battle of Buffalo, after which the villages of Black Rock and Buffalo were set ablaze and the navy yard on Buffalo Creek was destroyed.

In the tradition of British Army battle honours, this action was first awarded in 1815 as Niagara. Eight currently active battalions of the American Army perpetuate the lineages of three American infantry units (the old 14th, 19th and 24th Infantry Regiments) that were present at Fort Niagara.

The British held Fort Niagara for the remainder of the War of 1812, and it was ceded to the United States a second time in 1815 after the Treaty of Ghent had been ratified.





## **Fort Niagara, 1796-1813, 1815-Today**

Returned to the US in 1815, the fort remained a peaceful border post. It was expanded and strengthened during the American Civil War and occupied by troops into the 20th century. During World War II, Fort Niagara became a Prisoner of War camp.

Today, Fort Niagara, restored between 1927 and 1934, is a New York State historic site (listed in 1980) operated by the Old Fort Niagara Association and known as 'Old Fort Niagara'. Listed as a national historic landmark in 1960, the building is one of a number of structures making up what is also called the Colonial Niagara Historic District. Among its many features are a visitor centre, which displays, among other artefacts, the flag that was flying when the fort was captured by the British in 1813.

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